

Profile of adult literacy learners in Ireland 2000 - 2009

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NALA

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The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) was established in 1980 and is an independent membership organisation, concerned with developing policy, advocacy, research and offering advisory services in adult literacy work in Ireland. NALA has campaigned for the recognition of, and response to, the adult literacy issue in Ireland.

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Executive summary

Introduction

This report presents a descriptive profile of adult literacy participants in Vocational Education Committee (VEC) adult literacy services between 2000 – 2009. It is based on data drawn from the annual Adult Literacy Returns (ALRs) which are the current reporting system from the individual VECs to the Department of Education and Skills (DES)¹. The ALR data is a valuable source of information on current provision of adult literacy services. It is also the most comprehensive information available on participation in the adult literacy service and has the potential to inform the future development and planning in the adult literacy sector.

The primary aim of this research project is to develop a profile of adult literacy learners as a means of increasing our information, knowledge and understanding of this cohort of the population. This was achieved through the collation of data pertaining to adult literacy participants contained in the Adult Literacy Returns over the timeline. The report highlights the demographics of adult literacy participants and tuition trends across all years alongside an examination of 2006 insofar as this year coincided with the Irish census.

Outcomes

The main outcomes from the data are highlighted below but these should be considered against some of the methodological issues that arose in the collation process. The most significant was a large amount of reporting errors in previous years and the differences between what is reported year to year. Accordingly, data is presented in outputs that minimise these errors.

A profile of participants nationally

Based on the data the most significant findings are:

- There was an almost 200% increase in the number of literacy participants over the period 2000 – 2008 (17,150 to 49,962).
- This was followed by a 5% decrease in participation rates in 2009 (49,962 in 2008 to 47,266 in 2009).
- The drop in numbers comes mainly from females with an 8% decrease (28,755 in 2008 to 26,567 in 2009).
- In each year the majority (60%) of literacy participants were female.

¹ The ALR form is sent out to all VECs where it is filled in by the Adult Literacy Organiser and returned to the DES. The Department in turns enters the data into an EXCEL spreadsheet and the collated data is sent on to NALA.

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- In each year, over 50% of all participants were aged between 25 and 44 years.
 - Literacy participants are more likely to be unemployed or not in the labour market, compared to national rates of labour market participation over the same period.
 - Between 2008 and 2009, the number of literacy participants who were unemployed increased by 30% (from 11,588 to 14,941). Over the same period, the number of literacy participants who were employed fell by a little over 15% (from 18,537 to 15,670)
 - Over the period the proportion of total of participants presenting with the lowest level of literacy (Level 1) has dropped slightly and the proportion of participants who left school before they were 16 years of age also dropped slightly.

Tuition trends

- Mainstream² and ESOL courses had maintained a steady growth across the timeline up until 2007 when both experienced a drop in participation numbers. This coincided with an increase in other programmes such as intensive literacy, workplace tuition and family learning programmes.
- The majority of literacy participants continued to attend group sessions with this trend rising from 70% in 2000 to 85% in 2009.

Recommendations

Adult literacy statistics

- In order to minimise data collection errors, it is suggested that the DES provides support to VECs to coincide with the next round of data collection.
- Aggregated data is useful in obtaining a broad and basic level of analysis but does not provide for more detailed trend analysis, cross analysis and outcomes or impact analysis. It would be preferable if the data collection system provided for more correlation in relation to gender and socio-economic status, for example.

² Mainstream adult literacy programmes consists of one to one or group tuition for typically two to four hours per week during the academic year.

Future research

This report presents a profile of adult literacy learners in Ireland 2000 – 2009. In doing so it has raised some issues for future research consideration:

- Firstly, we propose that it would be beneficial to compare this data with other available data on other cohorts of adult learners or the general population;
- Secondly, we suggest an in-depth examination of research on barriers faced by adult literacy participants in gaining employment in conjunction with these statistics in order to establish what further supports and skills might enhance their employability;
- Thirdly, we propose that it would be beneficial to survey facilities and resources available in the context of analysing outcomes in order to help identify particularly effective facilities or resources; and lastly
- We propose that it would be beneficial to examine VECs' referral networks and marketing strategies against their respective participant profile bases in order to help establish best practices moving forward.

Background

In the past, literacy was framed in terms of the ability to read and write. Today the meaning of literacy has evolved to reflect changes in society and the skills needed by individuals to participate fully therein. NALA defines literacy as follows:

Literacy involves listening, speaking, reading, writing, numeracy and using everyday technology to communicate and handle information. But it includes more than the technical skills of communication: it also has personal, social and economic dimensions. Literacy increases the opportunity for individuals and communities to reflect on their situation, explore new opportunities and initiate change (NALA, 2011).

Most adults with literacy difficulties have some reading skills but may have difficulties in understanding official forms or in dealing with modern technology. Some will have left school confident about their numeracy and reading skills but find that changes in their workplace and everyday life make their skills inadequate as the literacy demanded by society is in constant flux.

The International Adult Literacy Survey did not define literacy in terms of an arbitrary standard of reading performance but in terms of proficiency levels along a continuum denoting how well adults use information to function in society and the economy. Literacy is defined as a particular capacity and mode of behaviour: "the ability to understand and employ printed information in daily activities, at home, at work, and in the community – to achieve one's goals and to develop one's knowledge and potential"³.

Results for Ireland published in 1997 and based on data collected in 1995 showed that one in four or 25% of Irish adults have literacy difficulties. It also indicated that over 80% of those who scored at the lowest level, Level 1 had a Junior Certificate qualification or less. To date, this remains the most up to date information on adult literacy levels in Ireland. The 2006 Census data showed that over one million people aged 15 years and over completed school with a Junior Certificate qualification or less. This is significant as research shows that education plays a dominant role in determining literacy levels and that young people who leave school without finishing the Junior cycle are at a disadvantage to those that complete the Leaving Certificate (Denny et al, 1999). This can have an impact on social, personal and employment opportunities for those involved.

³ OECD and Statistics Canada, 2000, *Literacy in the Information Age: Final Report of the International Adult Literacy Survey*.

More recent estimates shows that post primary school completion rates have increased and that non-completion of post primary school in Ireland has stabilised at 17% (Morgan, 2011; Byrne & Smyth, 2010).

In Ireland adult literacy tuition is provided by the VEC through their local adult literacy service. The adult literacy service offers a range of programmes that include Family Learning, English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and workplace programmes. The service also provides Intensive Tuition in Adult Basic Education (ITABE) that offers the learner the opportunity to access intensive tuition for up to six hours per week over a 14 week period. However, the vast majority of adult learners engage in 'mainstream' tuition which consists of either one-to-one or group tuition, typically for two to four hours per week, during the academic year. In addition to VEC adult literacy service provision, NALA offers a distance learning service where adults can learn over the internet or with a tutor over the phone in the comfort of their own home, library, workplace and/or community.

Data and methodology

The annual DES Adult Literacy Returns (ALR) are the chief mechanism through which the VECs provide information on participation numbers, tuition type, accreditation as well as assessments of literacy levels. With this in mind NALA approached the DES about carrying out a preliminary examination of the ALR in order to establish baseline data on adult literacy learners that would be of use to the DES and the VECs. The findings outlined in this report are the result of that examination.

The findings presented were conducted on aggregated quantitative data collected at a national level from individual VECs through annual returns to the DES⁴. A number of methodological issues arose that had to be compensated for in the analytical process. The most significant was a large amount of reporting errors where data were either missing altogether or reported significantly out of range which resulted in major gaps in the returns for certain years and VECs. In order to compensate, the analyses focused on limiting these effects by statistically selecting, where possible, years with low error rates.

The report is structured as follow:

⁴ DES enters the data from each VEC into a EXCEL spreadsheet and includes data on learner demographics, tutor number, tutor hours and tuition type. In conducting this research project NALA transported the data, pertaining to learners only, into the SPSS package for analysis.

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- Section 1 provides an overview of adult literacy levels in Ireland with an examination of the IALS 1997 data and data on educational attainment levels from Census 2006.
 - Section 2 provides a profile of adult literacy learners in VEC adult literacy services in Ireland across the timeline 2000 – 2009 concentrating on participation rates, gender and age profiles, educational attainment and tuition trends.

The final section focuses on summarising the data and on providing some broad recommendations for future research.

SECTION 1

Adult literacy levels in Ireland

The International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) conducted in 1995 and published in 1997 remains the most comprehensive study of adult literacy (between 16 and 64 years of age) rates in Ireland. According to the IALS, one in four or 25% of Irish adults have literacy difficulties.

Table 1 IALS Prose Literacy levels for Ireland ⁵

		Level 1 %	Level 2 %	Level 3 %	Level 4/5%
Ireland	Male	24.2	29.1	33.7	13
	Female	21	30.4	34.6	14
	Less than Junior Secondary	56.7	30.1	11.2	2
	Junior secondary	23.6	39.1	30.6	6.6
	Rural	26	34.3	30.5	9.2
	Urban	20.4	26.9	36.5	16.4
	Employed	17.4	28.3	38.1	16.1
	Unemployed	35.2	31.2	26.8	6.7

Source: Education Research Centre 1997

Table 1 shows the IALS results for prose literacy⁶ levels by the highest educational attainment levels and employment status. It indicates that, for example, females and the employed tend to have higher levels of literacy than males and the unemployed. It also indicates that over 80% of people at Level 1⁷ had a Junior Certificate qualification or less as their highest level of educational attainment.

The table also shows that approximately 30% of adults were found to perform at Level 2⁸ indicating literacy levels that are below the minimum expected for everyday life and work in a modern society.

⁵ The levels presented by the IALS relates in the following way to Irish National Framework of Qualifications Levels
IALS FETAC
Level 1 = Level 2
Level 2 = Level 3
Level 3 = Level 4

⁶ Prose literacy is the knowledge and skills needed to understand and use information from texts such as reports, brochures and instructions.

⁷ IALS Level 1 indicates that a person has profound literacy difficulties. At this level a person may, for example, have difficulty identifying the correct amount of medicine to take from the information found on the packet.

⁸ IALS Level 2 indicates that a person can deal with material that is simple, clearly laid out and in which the tasks involved are not too complex.

Table 2 Total Persons, Males and Females Aged 15 Years and Over Classified by Highest Level of Education Completed 2006

Highest Level completed	Males	Females	Total
Primary (incl. no formal education)	268,716	245,369	514,085
Lower secondary	304,732	268,679	573,411
Upper secondary	409,558	393,910	803,498

Source: CSO 2006

Table 2 sets out the highest level of educational attainment for those aged 15 years and over from the 2006 Census. It shows that over one million people completed school with a Junior Certificate qualification or less.

Figure 1 Comparison between Entry Education Level and Literacy Level in 2006

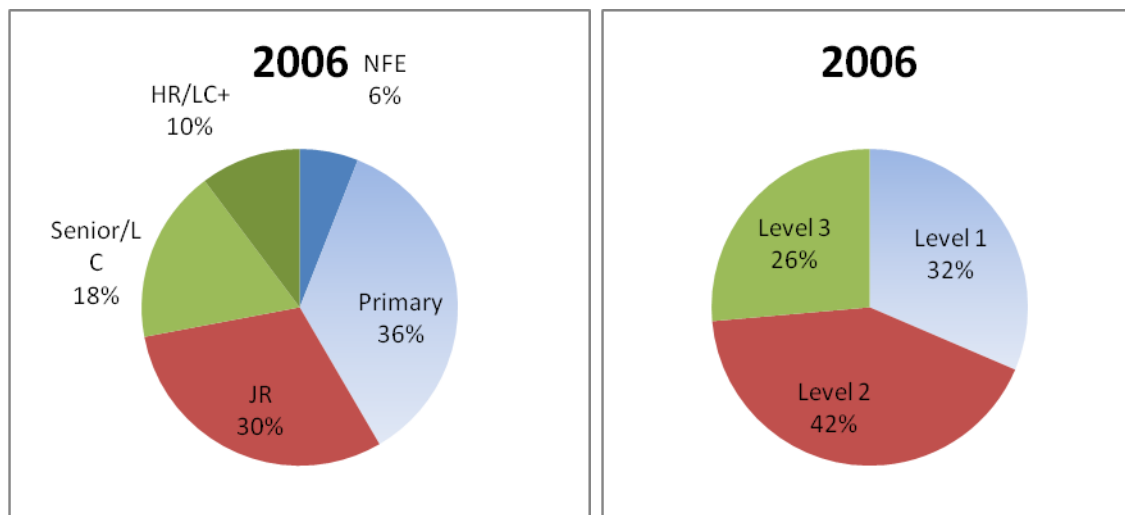


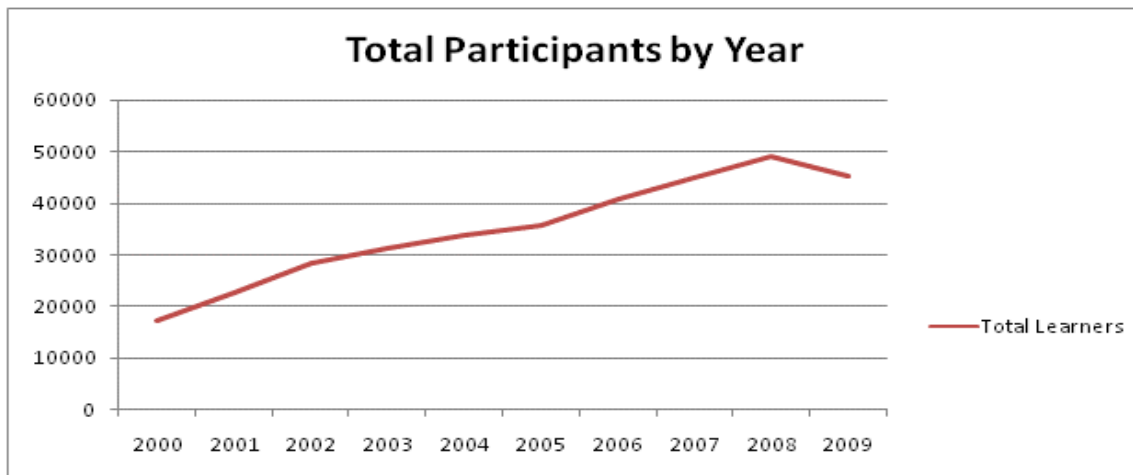
Figure 1 illustrates the highest educational qualification achieved by adult literacy participants and their literacy tuition levels. It shows that in 2006 the proportion of adult literacy participants with the lowest level of literacy, that is, Level 1 correlated with the proportion of adult literacy participants with no formal education or only a primary school education.

SECTION 2

National profile of literacy participants 2000-2009

Figure 2 illustrates the number of participants across adult literacy programmes year on year⁹. It shows a continuous rise over the period up to 2008 and a 5% decrease in numbers between 2008 and 2009.

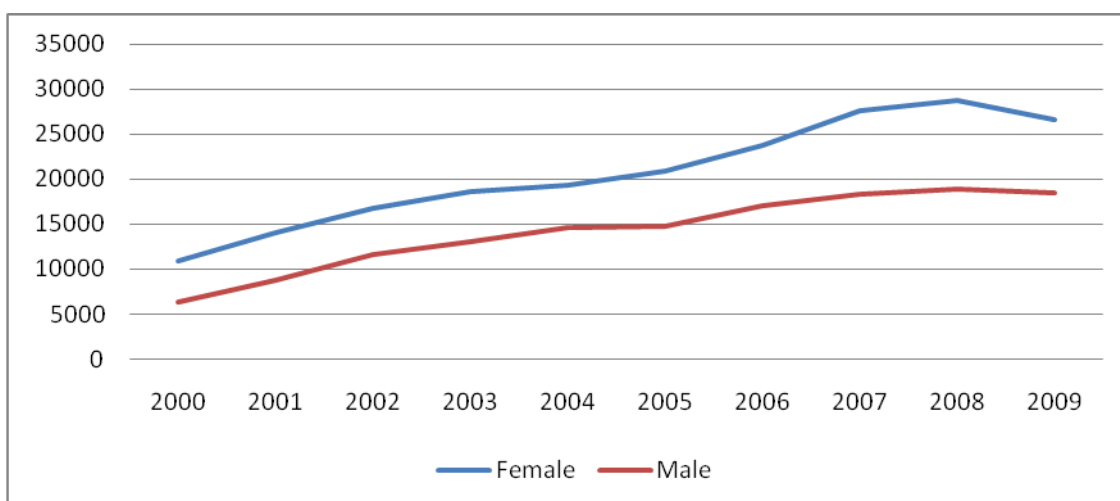
Figure 2 Total Participants in Adult Literacy Service by Year



Gender profile

Figure 3 shows that women are more likely to avail of literacy services. 2009 saw an 8% reduction in the number of females in the service as opposed to a 2% decrease in the number of men. Despite this reduction women still comprise 60% and men 40% of the overall adult learner population.

Figure 3 Literacy Participants by Gender

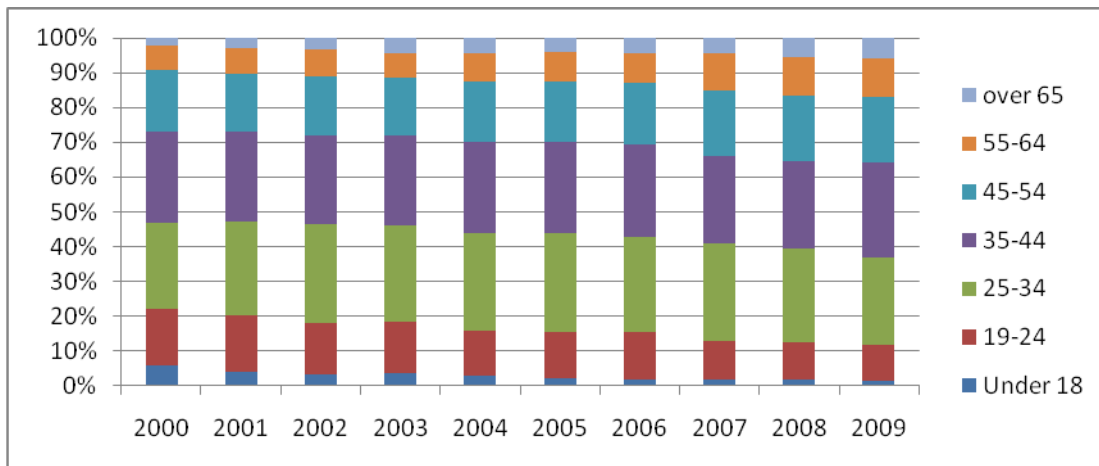


⁹ This includes learners in intensive tuition programmes

Age profile

Figure 4 shows that the majority of literacy participants are between 25 and 44 years of age. There has been a steady decrease in the proportion of participants under 24 years of age, particularly those under 18 years of age.

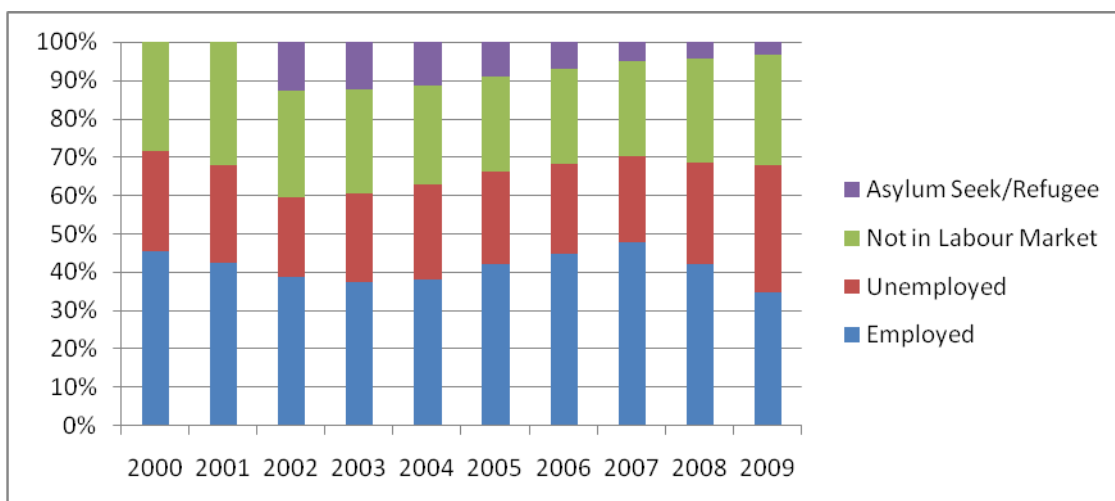
Figure 4 Average Participant Age Distribution over Time



Participant employment status

Participants' employment status has remained constant for the majority of the time period hovering around 40%. Unemployment levels also remained fairly constant with 2009 showing the first significant change. Figure 5 indicates an almost 30% increase in the numbers unemployed from 2008 to 2009. Figure 5 indicates that 2009 saw the lowest employment levels across the decade with less than 35% of clients in paid employment.

Figure 5 Participant Distribution of Economic Status by Year



Educational attainment and literacy level

Figure 6 below shows the highest educational attainment levels of adult literacy participants. It shows a decrease of 25% in the number of adults with the lowest levels of education from 2,601 participants in 2008 to 1,945 in 2009.

Figure 6 Distribution of Highest Educational Attainment

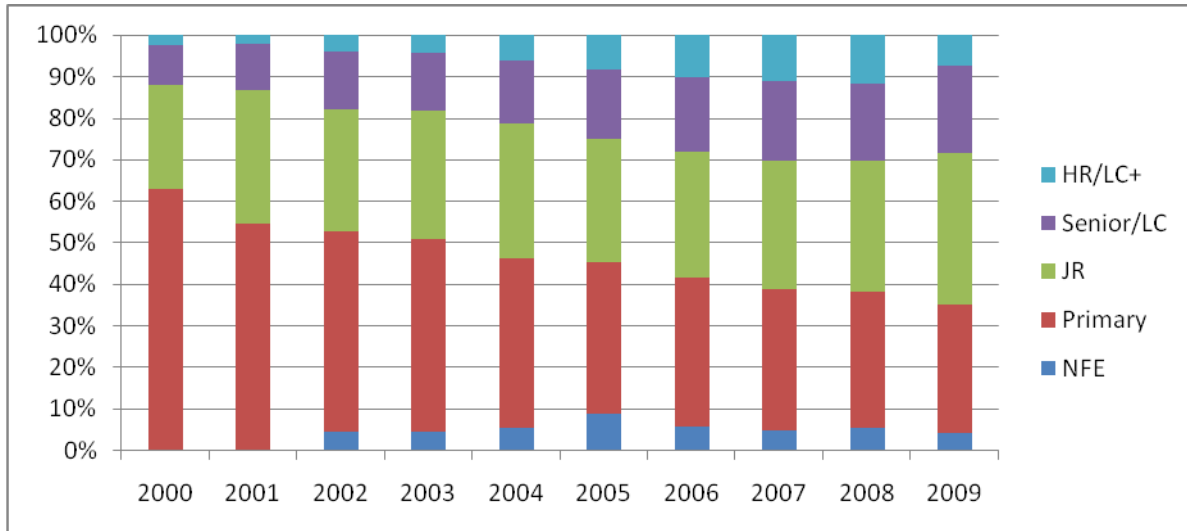
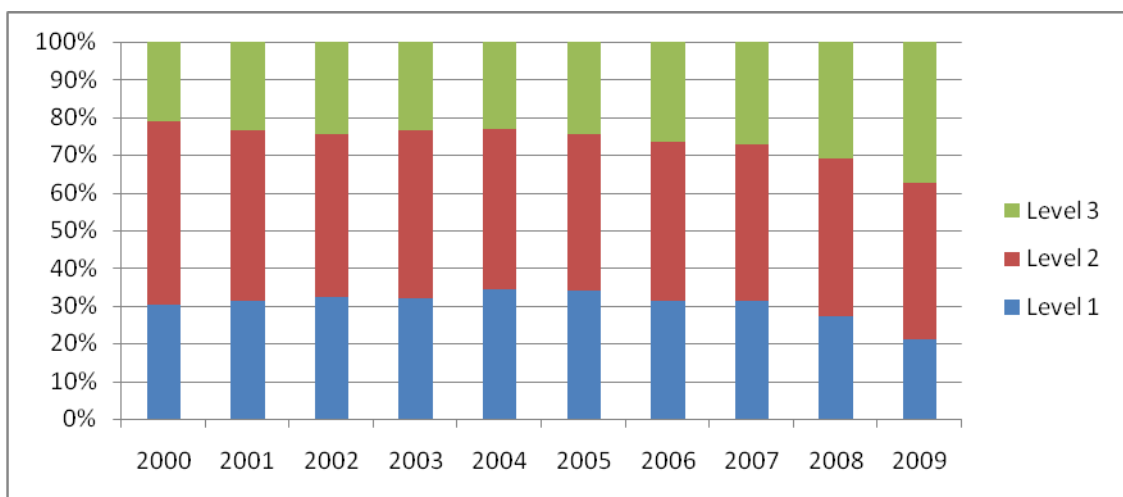


Figure 7 shows that the proportion of participants undertaking courses at Level 1 peaked in 2004, but overall, their proportion has decreased from 30% to 20% over the time period.

Figure 7 Distribution of Literacy Levels ¹⁰



¹⁰ It should be noted that the literacy levels definitions were not consistent between 2000-2009 with definitions in the earlier part of the decade based on informal DES levels later being replaced with NFQ (FETAC) levels in 2008 and 2009. In recognition of these differences, all data presented in this report have been standardised to the NFQ scale and reported in these terms.

Trends in tuition nationally

Figure 8 shows trends in literacy tuition programmes across the timeline. It indicates that both mainstream and ESOL courses maintained a steady growth across the timeline up until 2008 when both programmes experienced a drop in participation rates. This coincided with an increase in 'other' programmes such as intensive literacy and workplace tuition, and to a lesser degree family learning programmes.

Figure 8: Trends in Literacy Tuition across Programmes

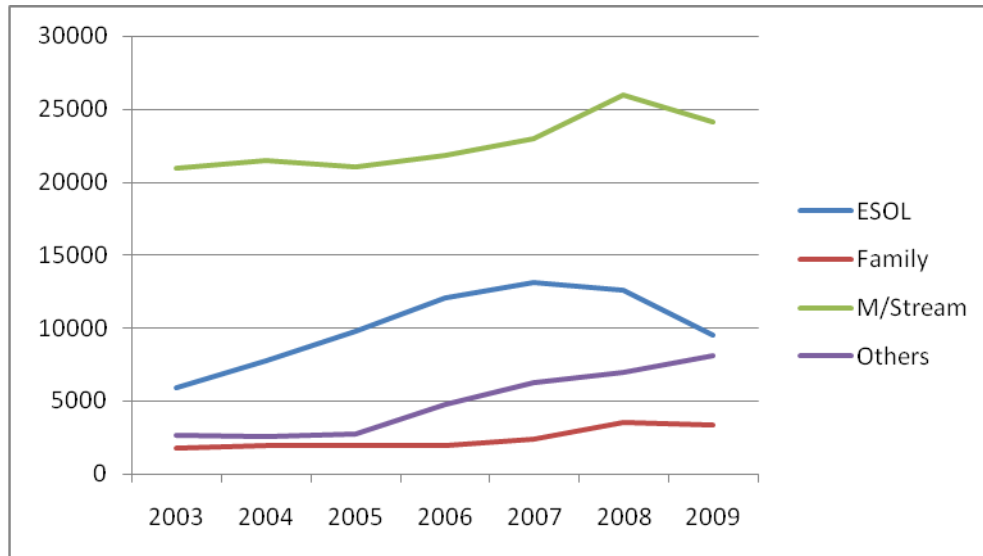
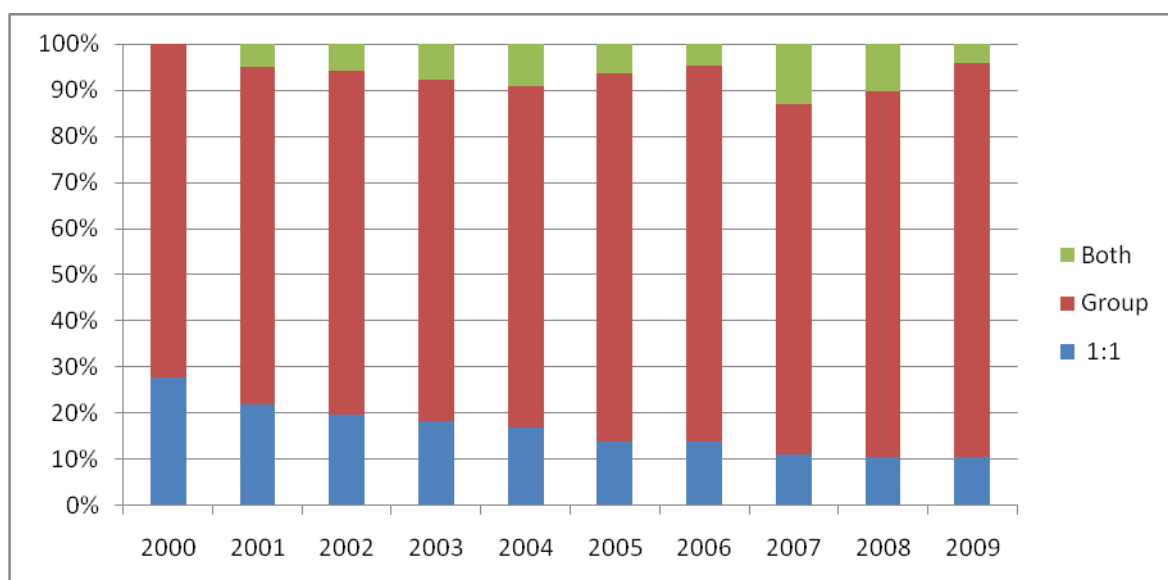


Figure 9 examines the type of tuition offered across all programmes. From this we can see that the majority of literacy participants attend group sessions rising from 70% in 2000 to 85% in 2009.

Figure 9 Trends in Literacy Tuition Type across Years



SECTION 3

Summary of findings

This report provides a profile of adult literacy learners in Ireland from 2000 – 2009. The data used for developing the profile came from the annual VEC Adult Literacy Returns to the DES. The main findings from the report show that:

- There was an almost 200% increase in the number of literacy participants over the period 2000-2008 (17,150 to 49,962).
- This was followed by a 5% decrease in participation rates in 2009 (49,962 in 2008 to 47,266 in 2009).
- The drop in numbers comes mainly from females with an 8% decrease (28,755 in 2008 to 26,567).
- In each year the majority (60%) of literacy participants were female.
- In each year, over 50% of all participants were aged between 25 and 44 years.
- Literacy participants are more likely to be unemployed or not in the labour market, compared to national rates of labour market participation over the same period.
- Between 2008 and 2009, the number of literacy participants who were unemployed increased by 30% (from 11,588 to 14,941). Over the same period, the number of literacy participants who were employed fell by a little over 15% (from 18,537 to 15,670)
- Over the period the proportion of participants presenting with the lowest level of literacy (Level 1) has dropped slightly and the proportion of participants who left school before they were 16 years of age also dropped slightly.

Discussion

- Existing research and official data suggest that literacy levels differ by gender. This holds true across most areas of education with girls more likely to outperform boys in academic results and boys more likely to leave school at an earlier age (DES 2007; Byrne et al, 2008; Morgan & Kett 2003). Women comprise 60% of the adult literacy learner population; however statistics from NALA's distance learning services indicated that men are in the majority. This might suggest that there is a gender preference in course instruction medium.
- The changes in age profile, in particular, the sharp fall in participants under 18 years of age, might be the result of increased persistence in school, lower levels

of unemployment in the period in question, or that those under 18 years of age are less likely to seek support.

- The IALS suggest that the unemployed are more likely to have lower levels of literacy. Adult literacy participants are 20% more likely to be unemployed and there is a significant number who are not in the labour market. This suggests a correlation between employment status and literacy levels as indicated by IALS.
- The proportions of adult literacy participants presenting with the lowest levels of literacy are roughly similar to the proportion of adult literacy participants with either no formal education or only primary level education.

Recommendations

Adult literacy statistics

- In order to minimise data collection errors, it is suggested that the DES provides support to VECs to coincide with the next round of data collection.
- Aggregated data is useful in obtaining a broad and basic level of analysis but does not provide for more detailed trend analysis, cross analysis and outcomes or impact analysis. It would be preferable if the data collection system provided for more correlation in relation to gender and socio-economic status, for example.

Future research

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